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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN - MOST MINORITY RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES COMPLETE MANDATORY RE-REGISTRATION

REF: DUSHANBE 575

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Tajik Ministry of Culture says it will succeed in re-registering most of the country's 84 non-Islamic churches and 300 large Friday prayer mosques before a January 1, 2010 deadline imposed by the April 2009 Law on Religion. However, government officials admit that they will not be able to register about half of the country's 3,000 "five-time" prayer mosques before the deadline. Officials say that they will not consider late-registering mosques "illegal" and will continue to register them in 2010. In general, the government has not used the re-registration process to target religious minority groups, though a Dushanbe court declared one Baptist Church illegal due to its refusal to register. One government analyst predicted that the government may revamp its entire religion policy in 2010 to play an even more active role in Muslim religious life.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Per the government of Tajikistan's April 2009 Law on Religious Practices, all registered religious organizations are required to submit applications for re-registration to the Ministry of Culture's Department of Religious Affairs (DRA) by January 1, 2010. Organizations that fail to submit re-registration paperwork by the deadline, or are currently unregistered, may submit "first-time" registration applications after the New Year with a new 300 somoni (70 USD) fee. Otherwise, the process will remain unchanged. Among other documents, religious organizations must present a list of 10 founding members, all of whom must be Tajik citizens who maintained a local residence for five years. Once the DRA approves registration of a religious organization, it issues it certificate with indefinite validity.

¶3. (SBU) The DRA, which oversees the registration process, re-registered nearly all of Tajikistan's 300 large Friday mosques and 67 of 84 registered non-Islamic religious organizations, according to Idibek Ziyoyev, Head of the DRA. The DRA twice met with representatives of religious minority groups to explain the re-registration process. Ziyoyev expects that most of the 17 outstanding non-Islamic religious organizations will submit re-registration applications to the DRA by the New Year, but said that several have "self-liquidated" and are no longer active. The DRA will not seek to close religious organizations that do not re-register before January 1, but rather seek to register them under the new regime.

¶4. (SBU) Ziyoyev admitted that the DRA is far behind schedule in registering the country's 3,000 small "five-time" prayer

mosques, where Muslims are permitted to recite "Namaz" prayers but not conduct Friday sermons. The DRA has re-registered only about half of these, which Ziyoyev blamed on low manpower. To register the mosques, local district officials must assist each mosque to complete the re-registration applications and submit related materials to the DRA for review. "It is physically impossible for my staff of 18 guys to re-register every mosque in the country by January. We are already working Saturday and Sunday. Many of the applications we receive are full of mistakes and we have to send them back." Ziyoyev admitted that the DRA would not be able to re-register up to half of the 3,000 "five-time" mosques in time, but denied that this would render them "illegal" after January. He said that the DRA will proceed to issue these mosques "new" registrations in 2010. Per the new Religion Law, a Friday mosque may only be permitted in a residential area with a population between 10,000 and 20,000 people. Ziyoyev said that DRA has not denied any re-registration application as a result of these new restrictions, but admits that unregistered mosques exist that violate the new legal restrictions. "No one has raised their voice about these extra mosques, but we will not register them."

¶ 15. (SBU) Abdullo Rahnamo, religion analyst for a government think-tank, said local officials are unlikely to risk confrontation with the influential Islamic clergy by closing unregistered mosques. Abdullo admitted that there is widespread opposition within the government to many of the restrictions in the Religion Law and predicted that officials will ignore many of its provisions. He said the January 1 deadline for mosque re-registration will likely be extended, albeit informally. "The government does not want to get into confrontation with Imams before the elections." Abdullo is drafting a new "Conception of Religion" to be released next year. Rahnamo's draft confirms the role of Hanafi Islam in the Tajik society,

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establishes a new Ministry of Religious Affairs and a national Islamic education center, puts imams on the state payroll, and softens objectionable elements of the April 2009 Religion Law. The goal, according to Abdullo, will be "for the state to participate in the population's move toward Islam. The people have already become more Islamic and the state is two or three years behind the people."

MINORITY RELIGIOUS GROUPS

¶ 16. (SBU) DUSHANBE SYNAGOGUE: Leader of Dushanbe's only synagogue, Mikhail Abdurahmonov, said that he has not yet submitted the community's re-registration application as he must first resolve a "bureaucratic question" regarding documentation of land donated by presidential brother-in-law Hassan Asadullozoda after the government bulldozed the former synagogue to build the "Palace of the Nation" (reftel). Abdurahmonov said DRA officials repeatedly have called the synagogue to urge him to submit the relevant paperwork so that the Jewish community can be re-registered before January 1. Abdurahmonov believes he will be able to resolve the outstanding land documentation issue and complete re-registration before the deadline.

¶ 17. (SBU) UNION OF EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN BAPTISTS (UECB): The 80-year old Church of Evangelical Christian Baptists in Dushanbe reported no problems in re-registering with the Minister of Culture. All six UECB-affiliated churches have completed re-registration. Church pastor Andrei Werwai reports that an additional eight additional UECB churches, hitherto operating with the approval of local officials, will need to submit first-time registration applications to the Ministry of Culture

after the New Year.

¶18. (SBU) BAPTIST HOUSE OF PRAYER: Andrei Chumachenko's un-registered Baptist Congregation, unaffiliated with the UECB, has refused to apply for registration as a religious organization as a matter of principle. "We have no organization and only gather to pray, sing songs, and worship, so we shouldn't need to register." In addition, Chumachenko said that by applying for registration, the church must commit to not proselytize within private homes. "If a non-believer invites us to his home, of course we will proselytize." A district court declared the church illegal on October 26 because of its refusal to register. The congregation has appealed the decision and argue that they are "not a religious organization". Chumachenko said that since the ruling the congregation has gathered to pray as usual in its worship hall without incident. "No one has come to check on us." The church has existed in Dushanbe since the early 1960's, when it broke off from the larger UECB, which it considered to be compromised by Soviet authorities.

¶19. (SBU) SEVENTH DAY ADVENTISTS: The DRA re-registered the Dushanbe Seventh Day Adventist Church, established in 1990, according to Pastor Edvard Dylev. The Church will file first-time registration applications for several new Seventh Day Adventist churches operating outside the capital. Dylev said that the re-registration process for the Dushanbe Church was relatively easy. However, the "Development and Progress" NGO affiliated with the Church is involved in a long-running legal case with the Rasht valley regional government. The NGO, part of Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) International, is managed by the Seventh Day Adventist's local leadership. After the "Development and Progress" management fired the country director for "moral indiscretions," Rasht valley officials filed a lawsuit against the NGO for breach of contract for failing deliver a coal shipment. Dylev claims that the charges are baseless and that the former country director, who has high-level connections, falsified the coal agreement and engineered the trial as an act of revenge. After Tajik officials searched the NGO's office grounds, located adjacent to the church, and found a Bible, the courts also charged that the NGO is a religious organization. ADRA won its first round in court over the coal agreement, but an appellate court ruled against the NGO. ADRA has appealed. Dylev said that he does not believe that the legal action is directed against the church.

¶10. (SBU) BA'HAI COMMUNITY: The Ba'hai religious community has submitted re-registration applications for all six currently

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registered local assemblies and its National Spiritual Assembly. National secretary Mahnoz Zhanmakhmadova said that several of these Ba'hai assemblies could not obtain registration documentation from local government officials, but the DRA intervened to resolve the issue by providing commensurate documents. Zhanmakhmadova said that the DRA indicated it will approve all of the outstanding re-registration applications by the New Year. In addition, Zhanmakhmadova said the Dushanbe city government is posting the Ba'hai community's contact information on its website for visitors. The Ba'hai community will submit additional applications for new branches after the New Year.

11: (SBU) JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES, JAMAAT AL TABLIGH, AND SALAFIS: The government continues to ban activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Jamaat Al Tabligh Islamic missionary group, and the fundamentalist Salafi sect. The Jehovah's Witness were registered as a religious organization until 2008, when a Tajik

court declared their activities illegal and nullified their registration. Officials have told the Jehovah's Witnesses that since they were banned by court order, they may not re-register, according to Jehovah's Witnesses representatives. On December 9, a Dushanbe court initiated criminal proceedings against 56 members of Jamaat Al Tabligh following an April raid on a mosque affiliated with the banned group. Jamaat Al Tabligh members claim that their missionary activities are exclusively peaceful, but a senior government security official told emboff that members of Tabligh attempted to join a militant group in Tavildara in summer 2009. Abdullo Rahnamo said that the government is likely to back down on its campaign against Tabligh after complaints from prominent Muslim Imams, but continue its crackdown against the Salafis, who are considered by most clergy to be a dangerous and foreign influence. Six Salafis are awaiting trial in Dushanbe.

12: (SBU) COMMENT: Embassy contacts indicate that the government has so far not used the re-registration requirement to harass minority religious groups in Tajikistan. Bureaucratic disorganization, rather than government hostility, has caused most of the delays. The government's residency requirements for church founders, however, may impede recently arrived missionaries from establishing new churches. While most minority religious groups continue to report a good relationship with the authorities, the government continues to take a hard line on groups that engage in aggressive proselytizing of a "foreign" ideology. After much discontent following the 2009 Religion Law, some officials recognize that the government needs to seek rapprochement with the country's traditional religious leadership. President Rahmon tried to score points with the Muslim community with his declaration Year of Imam Azzam Al Hanafi. It is likely that the government will seek to expand such initiatives, play a greater role in Islamic life in Tajikistan, and reward Islamic clergy that play ball. END

COMMENT

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